



# Merit is not a Number Game

**T**he criteria for admission to a university must be merit. But let us not reduce 'merit' to a rank in some competitive exam. To be more just and inclusive, we need to develop wider criteria for admission. The admission process must account for 'handicaps' faced by genuine groups of applicants and give them weightage against it.

"What should be the criteria for admission in a university?" I asked several colleagues. "Merit, of course. What else can be the criteria," they asked me back, puzzled that an academician could even raise such a question. But I persisted. "What is merit? Is it a number in AIEEE or some other exam? Are you sure you are getting the best students using that number?" Now, a few of them started having some doubts. But they soon recovered, and dealt the ace up their sleeves: "Maybe we miss a few good students who happen to perform badly on that given day. But we must follow a transparent system that can be defended in a court of law."

Without realising, my colleagues had already admitted that the primary focus of the admission process is to avoid litigation. In truth, admission based on a single number, has hardly been followed in our country. Reserva-

tions of all sorts ensure that we look at the caste of candidates too. But mostly we trust that single magic number.

Unfortunately, random de-selection is not the only problem with admissions based on a rank in a single exam. There is actually a systematic de-selection of large groups of people in these tests. In any admission process, chance will play a small role, and we will miss out on some good students as a result. But if the admission process discourages or discriminates against a large set of potential students, that must be a cause for concern.

## Problems of Ranks

Consider the result of AIEEE or JEE, you will find very few girl students in the top 10,000. However, if you look at the Class XII results of any board exam in the country, you will find an equal number of girls and boys in the top positions. There could be many reasons for this stark difference in the performance in the two exams. One is the fact that parents feel uncomfortable at the thought of their school-going girl going to Kota (or any other centre) for coaching. Even within their hometown, parents don't want her to reach back home

late in the night. Also, many parents may not want to invest in the girl child's education, especially in coaching. Given the fact that almost all admission tests today are pattern-based, a student coached in pattern matching is likely to do much better than another who has studied the subjects well, but does not know the tricks of the trade. Girls, naturally, fare worse at such exams.

The competitive exams create a bias against girls. Though this bias is not deliberate or intentional, institutes ought not to walk away from the problem by calling this a social issue beyond their purview. Rather, private universities should worry about this, because this gives them an opportunity to improve the quality of their intake; and government universities should bother, because if they don't, one day the government will force them to, and in ways that they may not like.

### Deal with It

There can be two ways of handling biases. One, to come up with a process that doesn't make rank the only criteria for admission. Second, to look at the results of major exams and compensate each applicant for all the handicaps that they may have faced. It may be worthwhile to consider a policy which adds bonus marks to those obtained by girls in such an exam, and then create the so-called merit list. In fact, such a process can be expanded to find meritorious students in all such groups which do not find sufficient representation in your classroom. A private university, not required to have reservations, may try compensating on other grounds. For example, studying in a village school is certainly a handicap when competing in admission tests. The achievement of a village lad in getting 85 per cent marks is more praiseworthy (and reflective of merit) than the achievement of a city lad in getting 90 per cent marks. Hence providing compensation of a few percentage points for having done schooling in a village makes sense.

Such a methodology allows universities to fine tune admission policy (something that fixed reservations don't allow). The case for giving preference to those groups which have an obvious handicap or face discrimination is clear. You are actually trying to find the real meritorious students. (And this reason can even be explained in a court of law.) But there is also a case for giving preference to some other groups where there is no such handicap or discrimination. Such a preference would be very small in terms of overall number of students admitted under such preferences. But this would have healthy consequences

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for the university and the quality of education that it provides.

The universities must attempt to have a diverse class. Having students from different regions, cultures, and backgrounds has a huge educational value for everyone. Diversity is difficult to justify on the basis of merit, but its effect on the education of those who have been admitted are positive and such admissions can be justified.

On the other hand, a case can also be made that a university must help build local capabilities, and support innovation in its neighbourhood. Typically, students from local areas are more likely, to make a local impact in terms of economy and politics. If someone is a good sportsperson (say, has played for the country), then some credit could be given for that. Universities may want to offer some credit to wards of their faculty and other staff. Attracting quality faculty is a challenge for any university. Preferred admission to the wards will allow a university to compete with other universities for the same faculty pool and enhance its size.

To summarise, an admission process based on a single number – a rank in a test – is not a good system. It may not be an indicator of merit in some cases, and may even be biased. A system based on giving credit to compensate certain definite handicaps is likely to get better students. Further, the system can be expanded to give preference to certain groups to meet the goals of the university in terms of diversity, inclusion, encouragement to students with certain skills, and attract faculty. ■■■

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### AUTHOR'S BIO

Dr Sanghi is the former director of Laxmi Narayan Mittal Institute of Information Technology, Jaipur. He is a professor of computer science at IIT, Kanpur. Dr Sanghi has a BTech in Computer Science from IIT Kanpur and an MS and a PhD from University of Maryland, USA. He can be reached at [dheeraj.sanghi@edu-leaders.com](mailto:dheeraj.sanghi@edu-leaders.com)